YALE HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS, MISCELLANY, 108

MILLENARIAN REBELLION IN CHINA

The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813

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New Haven and London, Yale University Press
1976

Published under the direction of the Department
of History of Yale University with assistance
from the income of the Frederick John Kingsbury
Memorial Fund.

Library of Congress catalog card number: 75–18180
International standard book number: 0–300–01893–2

Designed by John O.C. McCrillis
and set in Baskerville type.
Printed in the United States of America by
The Murray Printing Company, Westford, Massachusetts.

Published in Great Britain, Europe, Africa, and Asia
(except Japan) by Yale University Press, Ltd., London.
Distributed in Latin America by Kaiman & Polon, Inc.,
New York City; in Australia and New Zealand by Book & Film
Services, Artarmon, N.S.W., Australia; in Japan by John
Weatherhill, Inc., Tokyo.

For my parents, Howard and Mary Naquin

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Acknowledgments

IT has been my very good fortune to have had Jonathan Spence as my teacher and adviser. This work has greatly benefited from his assistance, shrewd insights, and good judgment; his continuing enthusiasm for the Eight Trigrams has given me encouragement and much pleasure. He also taught me to care that this book be a good story and tried to show me how to make it one.

I should also like to express my appreciation to others who read in full or in part the Ph.D. dissertation on which this book is based and helped me improve it: Beatrice S. Bartlett, Hilary J. Beattie, Chuang Chi-fa, Roger V. DesForges, Joseph Fletcher, Daniel L. Overmyer, Frederic Wakeman, Jr., Arthur F. Wright, and Judy Metro of Yale University Press. Antony Marr and Hideo Kaneko of the East Asian Collection at Yale University and George E. Potter of the Harvard-Yenching Library have been very helpful for many years.

Daniel L. Overmyer, whose interest in White Lotus religion long antedates my own, has generously given me much valuable assistance, and it has been a pleasure to share his enthusiasm for the subject. I should also like to thank other friends in Taiwan who taught me about Chinese popular religion and showed it to me live and in action. I am particularly indebted to Parker Po-fei Huang of Yale University, who with much expertise and patience helped me understand Ch'ing texts, especially those dealing with religious practices, ideas, and symbolism.

The Ch'ing dynasty archives in the National Palace Museum in the Republic of China were invaluable to this study. I am most grateful to the director of the museum, Dr. Chiang Fu-ts'ung, and to the staff of the Books and Documents Department for allowing me access to these materials and for all their kind assistance. It was Beatrice S. Bartlett who first called the 1813 palace attack to my attention, and her knowledge of and assistance with the Chia-ch'ing period materials in the National Palace Museum made my work there infinitely simpler and more pleasurable. I also wish to thank the American Association of University Women and the Yale Con-

cilium on International and Area Studies for the financial support that made it possible for me to go to Taiwan and use these archives.

To my family and friends who have been wondering what in the world I have been doing all these years, it is a pleasure to say *voilà*.

S.N.

New Haven, Connecticut
May 1975

Millenarian Rebellion in China

Introduction

IN the autumn of 1813 religious sects calling themselves the Eight Trigrams planned a rebellion that involved simultaneous uprisings in several cities of north China, including Peking. The members of these sects were converts to a three-hundred-year-old millenarian religion whose central deity was known as the Eternal and Venerable Mother. The rebellion, sect leaders promised, was destined to bring about the fall of the reigning Ch'ing dynasty and the inauguration of a new era of "endless blessings." The uprisings took place as planned but were imperfectly coordinated. An attempt to seize the Forbidden City in Peking was quickly thwarted, and government troops were immediately dispatched to restore order in the provinces. The rebels were eventually besieged in a single city in northern Honan province, and after three months of fighting, the city was taken and the rebellion of the Eight Trigrams brought to an end.

This rebellion has been known to historians under a variety of names, and the confusion reflects the fact that it has been studied only in a peripheral way. Although unusually rich primary source material is available, there is no monograph on this subject in Chinese, Japanese, or a Western language.[1] Peasant movements and popular religion in China have not always been favored subjects for research, and in recent writings the 1813 uprising has been overshadowed by the major rebellions of the mid-nineteenth century (those of the Taiping, the Nien, and the Muslims) that had palpable effects on the imperial order and the course of modern Chinese history. Furthermore, these events of 1813 have been caught in the no-man's-land of the late middle Ch'ing, too early for "modern" Chinese history (usually considered to begin in 1840) and too late for "early" Ch'ing history (which presently extends to the late 1700s). Nevertheless, the Eight Trigrams rebellion was the last uprising in north China that posed a real threat to the government in the period prior to the Opium War (1840) and the subsequent penetration of the Western world into China. It occurred at a time when China was allegedly in decline, its armies incompetent, its officials corrupt, and its coffers empty; yet these rebels were suppressed by the Ch'ing government with apparent speed and efficiency. Sufficiently well-organized and long-lived to have shaken the emperor

and required several months to put down and yet small enough to have remained close to its original organization and intentions, this rebellion provides an excellent opportunity to study the phenomenon of the traditional peasant rebellion in China.

It is perhaps even more important that the Eight Trigrams uprising was typical of those regular outbursts of peasant protest that occurred in north China during the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1911) and that were expressed through the organization of a religious sect and a millenarian ideology. The phenomenon of the religiously inspired peasant rebellion, although common in China during the Ch'ing, has been neglected by Western historians. A multiplicity of names for rebel and religious groups appearing again and again in the historical record has obscured the nature of this millenarian religion. Religious sects have been lumped together with criminal gangs of many sorts and collectively described as "secret societies" and dissenters from the established order. Some historians have postulated a geographic difference between such organizations, but the debate over the possible distinctions between those in the north of China and those in the south has continued without being clearly resolved and without further illuminating the problem.[2] Seeing similarities among the northern, seemingly more religious, secret societies, some historians have maintained that they were in fact all part of one long-lived cleverly camouflaged cabal called the "White Lotus Society."[3] A connection between the religious groups and the rebellions in which they were sometimes involved was perceived but not understood.

It is my contention that a careful study of this "White Lotus Society" reveals not a mysterious monolithic organization but small scattered groups of believers whose common religion had been transmitted since the sixteenth century through long and loose chains of teachers and disciples. Followers of this religion, normally concerned with private devotions, also anticipated a period of great cataclysms when they would cast aside their ordinary lives and, following the deity sent to lead them, join together and rise up to usher in a new and perfect world in which all people found salvation through their faith and their faith alone. Practitioners of this discretely transmitted heretical religion could, when their leaders predicted that the millennium was imminent, be literally transformed into openly defiant rebels against the state and the established order. It was this millennial message perpetuated through a normally

diffuse but potentially cohesive organization that made believer and rebel merely different phases of the same salvational process.

The Eight Trigrams rebellion of 1813 was one of many uprisings undertaken by these sects during their long history. Through this one example it is possible to see how scattered believers in a common religion were drawn together organizationally and persuaded to risk their lives and fortunes to bring about this heaven on earth. Furthermore, the ideas and organization of this rebellion can provide a yardstick with which later uprisings, influenced by modern Western civilization, can be compared and their new or traditional ingredients clarified and appreciated. These comparisons should affect our understanding of the Boxer uprising of 1900, which was generated by this White Lotus religion; of the Taiping rebellion (1850–65), which was not; and of the Chinese Communists, whose relation to this millenarian tradition has not yet been studied.

The suppression of the Eight Trigrams was deemed of sufficient importance by the Ch'ing government to warrant the assemblage and publication of all essential official documents relating to the rebellion. This eight-volume collection and the many other more detailed documents preserved in the archives of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan provide an enormous wealth of information about these religious sects, their short-lived uprising, and particularly the rebels and would-be rebels themselves. For the most part, government documents describe rebellion through the eyes of its official enemies; the near monopoly on record-keeping by the ruling class assured that all rebellions were so filtered and refined for future generations. The Eight Trigrams uprising is an especially exciting event to study because within the official account are many colloquial descriptions of the rebellion by the men who planned and organized it.

It was standard procedure for Ch'ing officials at all levels to interrogate prisoners before sentencing them and to report these interrogations in writing to their superiors. This policy was implemented with special diligence and at the highest levels in the case of the 1813 rebellion because the reigning Chia-ch'ing Emperor (1796–1820) felt the attack on the Forbidden City to have been an affront to him personally, and because the existence of this dangerous group so near the throne was considered intolerable. Captured rebels were questioned in detail about the nature and extent of their involvement in a religious sect and in the rebellion, and arrests and interrogations

continued for at least five years. More than four hundred such confessions have survived, and though they are not always reliable on minor points,[4] they contain a wealth of the kind of information and detail that has been unavailable for the history of most popular uprisings in China.

This study is divided into four parts and begins with an examination of the millenarian religion which during the Ch'ing dynasty inspired periodic rebellions such as that of the Eight Trigrams. Parts Two, Three, and Four focus on the 1813 uprising itself and describe the original Eight Trigram sects and their reorganization under dynamic leadership, the transformation of these believers into rebels against the state, and finally their unsuccessful attempt to defeat government armies in battle.